



Are autism, vaccines and mercury related?

By Rep. Dave Weldon (R-Fla.) February 7, 2005

In January 2004, the nation's pediatricians received an autism ALARM [an acronym for an American Academy of Pediatrics communication program] stating autism-spectrum disorders (ASD) were affecting 1 in 166 children (90 percent of them are boys).

This far exceeds the 1 in 3,000 rate of the early 1980s. Last year, California added 3,074 autistic children to its rolls. Every state has seen a dramatic increase.

Few Americans understand the magnitude of the human toll and the urgency with which we must act. Autism impairs an individual's ability to communicate with the world. Interventions are costly and have limited effectiveness. To date there is no known cure, and many children now affected will ultimately become wards of the state at great costs to taxpayers.

So far, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and other health officials have been unable to tell us the cause of this dramatic increase in the incidence of this terrible condition. Part of the reason may be that CDC officials have been spending most of their time trying to tell us what hasn't caused it.

Many parents believe that their children's autism may be associated with a vaccine or a mercury-based vaccine additive. Many parents claim their children were developing normally until they received certain shots. CDC officials have been quick to dismiss such notions, and they have been slow and reluctant to investigate this hypothesis. The CDC's lack of response undermines public confidence in the CDC and the vaccine program.

I am a strong proponent of childhood vaccines. My children have been vaccinated. Vaccines protect children from permanent disability and death, and I consider it critically important that we protect the integrity of this vital public-health program.

Parental concerns regarding vaccine safety are not totally without merit. For years, children in America received the diphtheria, pertussis and tetanus shot at 2, 4 and 6 months of age. This shot contained a mercury-containing preservative called thimerosal. Then in the late 1980s and early 1990s, two additional mercury-containing injections were added to the schedule.

Apparently, no one at the National Immunization Program (NIP) within CDC did the calculations regarding the cumulative mercury exposure. The net effect of this was that, in the 1990s, babies in America were exposed to mercury by injection at levels not considered safe by the Environmental Protection Agency for oral consumption by adults. Children, with their rapidly developing nervous systems, are considered much more vulnerable to mercury's toxic effects.

NIP leaders have attempted to allay public concern about mercury by commissioning an Institute of Medicine report. This report received much press attention when its results seemed to conclude that there was no link between mercury and autism.

However, careful review of this report shows that it is based almost exclusively on European data, where children were exposed to substantially lower levels of mercury, raising serious questions about its validity.

Fortunately, NIP officials did have the presence of mind in 1999 to begin removing mercury from most of the routine vaccines. If mercury is implicated, we should begin to see autism incidences declining in the years ahead as infants born today are no longer exposed to these high levels of mercury.

Other parents have suggested that their children's autism followed shortly after their measles, mumps and rubella vaccinations — given at about 15 months of age. Their children appeared to be developing normally until after the vaccination, when their children lost skills and deteriorated.

Several investigators have found measles present in the inflamed intestines of children with autism. Others have discovered evidence of measles particles in the spinal fluid of these children. Why is it there? What effect is it having on the children? Is it there because the children have autism or is it contributing to autism? We simply don't know, but we must investigate.

As a clinician and a strong supporter of the tremendous benefits of vaccinations, I believe it is important to listen to the concerns of the parents of these autistic children and do the necessary research to answer these questions. I commend federal officials for removing mercury from most childhood vaccines. Unfortunately it remains in the childhood flu vaccine, and I will again introduce legislation to eliminate mercury from this vaccine.

It's time for a new day of aggressive research to make vaccines safer for everyone, to understand fully what effects small amounts of mercury may have on infants

and to develop better measures to screen-out children at risk for an adverse vaccine reaction. The NIH and CDC have been slow to respond to this crisis, and it is time for Congress to act more assertively.

Weldon, a physician, is a member of the Appropriations Labor, Health and Human Services and Education Subcommittee.